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Changing human nature, ecology, ethics, genes, and god [Buchbesprechung]

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Peterson, J.C.: 2010, Changing Human Nature, Ecology Ethics, Genes, and God. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 259 pages. ISBN 978-0802865496. Price € 13.99

In *Changing Human Nature*, the American theologian James C. Peterson gives a Christian defense of genetic intervention on human beings. He argues that we are called to alter nature, which includes our bodies, and therefore our genes. Peterson proceeds in four parts. First, after arguing that nature "including ourselves" is changing, not static, Peterson shows that we have a responsibility towards creation.

He writes, "Human beings were created to naturally change nature" (p. 91) and to "sustain, restore, and improve ourselves and our world" (p. 152). To do so, we can use technology, which we can direct to help us, not harm us. Moreover, because human nature is dynamic, we can alter our bodies and genes for the better. Second, Peterson criticizes three popular guidelines used to offer caution about altering human nature: enhancement vs. therapy, designing vs. welcoming, present vs. future, arguing that each guideline is inadequate and sometimes misleading. Third, he outlines four standards better suited to guide us: Safety, Improvement, Increase Choice for the Recipient, and Best Use of Resources. Finally, he addresses the question of who will be in charge of applying these standards.

Peterson successfully demonstrates that, in fact, human nature is dynamic, not static, even if this is not by itself a reason for deliberately modifying it. He is also right that our current guiding criteria are not sufficient and often problematic. Additionally, we can admire his effort to come up with new standards to improve the current criteria. However, his principles seem incomplete and might lack stronger guidance. For instance, one could argue that transgenesis will change nature for the better. Nevertheless, one should also reflect why more choice is necessarily better, or what higher purposes it serves. Let us suppose that people decide to transfer genes that will allow their children to glow in the dark (as it has already been done with monkey). This new ability and the procedure would be safe. This will increase the recipients' capacities, as they will be able to be a light in the dark. However, would this radical change make people "better"? It is very likely that many would consider such an enhancement as "dehumanizing". Therefore, it seems that we need additional standards to prevent unintended consequences, from which we have already seen disaster as we have altered our ecosystem. Some could say that enhancement should be restricted to the use of human genes. However, if we already use pigs' valves to improve humankind, why not pigs' genes? Therefore, ethicists still need to think of what standard should be added here.

Negatively, while Peterson confronts bioconservative voices in this debate, he does not challenge bioliberals or transhumanists. What does Peterson think of their views of radically altering human nature? It seems that Christian thinkers would not agree with mind uploading, as it denies the importance of the incarnation and bodily resurrection. Positively, while some Christians might complain that Peterson's views make no more difference than a bioliberal stance, it might simply be that they share the same view. Moreover, it also shows how theology can bring a reasonable input in this discussion.

Finally, even though the book seems incomplete, it will be an excellent read for anyone interested in questions about how far we should modify nature. One can surely build on Peterson's proposal in order to keep searching for an answer. Readers will enjoy it, as the book is well written, logically argued and informed from a sound theological viewpoint. Alongside this book, I would recommend reading a more moderate Christian position, which gives a middle ground between bioconservatives and bioliberals: *Biotechnology and The Human Good* by C. Ben Mitchell (Georgetown University Press, 2007).

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